

Michael A. Zona,¹ M.D., Kaushal K. Sharma,² M.D., and John Lane,³ Lt.

A Comparative Study of Erotomaniac and Obsessional Subjects in a Forensic Sample

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ABSTRACT: Erotomania is the delusional belief that one is passionately loved by another. These persons often go to great lengths to approach their object of desire, often necessitating the attention of the law. We have reviewed a forensic sample to select subjects who meet criteria for the diagnosis of erotomania.

Case histories from all of the case files of the Threat Management Unit of the Los Angeles Police Department were reviewed to compare erotomaniac subjects with those who were suffering from other disorders. Various demographic and other relevant data were examined to determine if the erotomaniac subjects presented similar or different profiles.

KEYWORDS: forensic psychiatry, erotomania, love obsessional, simple obsessional, obsessional pursuit, dangerousness, public figure protection, stalkers, mentally disordered offenders, human behavior

Erotomania is the delusional belief that one is passionately loved by another. This disease, classified in Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, (DSM-III-R), under Delusional Disorder [1], was classically known as "de Clerambault's Syndrome." Patients suffering from this disorder will often go to great lengths to contact the person of their delusion, usually either a person of higher socioeconomic class and status or an unattainable public figure. These attempts are sometimes so vigorous that the patient comes to the attention of the criminal-justice system. It is our purpose to propose a guideline for the assessment of the various features of these patients in attempting to better understand their behavioral patterns, potential risk to victims, means of intervention and to create a scientific data base for further study.

The French psychiatrist, G. G. de Clerambault, is usually credited with first describing the salient features of erotomania, "de Clerambault syndrome" of "psychose passionelle" [2]. The term erotomania has been used in the past to describe various clinical syndromes, and as such, has led to some confusion among clinicians. Newly defined in DSM-III-R, the syndrome is now classified as a subtype of the delusional (paranoid) disorder (Table 1).

The essential feature of the delusional disorder syndromes is the presence of a persistent

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¹Fellow, Institute of Psychiatry, Law and Behavioral Science, University of Southern California School of Medicine, Psychiatric Hospital, Los Angeles, CA.

²Institute of Psychiatry, Law and Behavioral Science, University of Southern California School of Medicine, Psychiatric Hospital, CA.

³Lieutenant, Threat Management Unit, Los Angeles Police Department, Detective Headquarters.

TABLE 1—*Diagnostic criteria for 297.10 delusional disorder.*

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- A. Nonbizarre delusion(s) (that is, involving situations that occur in real life, such as being followed, poisoned, infected, loved at a distance, having a disease, being deceived by one's spouse or lover) of at least one month's duration.
- B. Auditory or visual hallucinations, if present, are not prominent (as defined in Schizophrenia, A(1)(b)).
- C. Apart from the delusion(s) or its ramifications, behavior is not obviously odd or bizarre.
- D. If a major depressive or manic syndrome has been present during the delusional disturbance, the total duration of all episodes of the mood syndrome has been brief relative to the total duration of the delusional disturbance.
- E. Has never met criterion A for schizophrenia, and it cannot be established that an organic factor initiated and maintained the disturbance.
- Specify type:** The following types are based on the predominant delusional theme. If no signal delusional theme predominates, specify as unspecified type.
- Erotomantic type:** Delusional disorder in which the predominant theme of the delusion(s) is that a person, usually of higher status, is in love with the subject.
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and systematized delusional belief system that is nonbizarre in quality. To make the diagnosis of delusional disorder, the patient must never have met criterion A for schizophrenia as outlined in the DSM-III-R. Auditory or visual hallucinations, if present, cannot be a prominent feature. Additionally, apart from the patient's delusion, his or her behavior is otherwise normal. The delusion usually takes the form of the following types based upon the thematic content: erotomantic, grandiose, jealous, persecutory, and somatic.

Stated simply, people suffering from the erotomantic type have the delusion that they are loved by another. The delusion is frequently one of an idealized love, a "perfect match." The person is convinced that the object, usually of the opposite sex, fervently loves him or her, and would return the affection if not for some external influence. The onset of symptoms is sudden; the person often has had only brief or no prior contact with the object. A clinical feature operating in these persons is the development of ideas of reference. They believe that actions, events, or otherwise usual behaviors by the object take on special meaning specifically intended for the person. He or she rejects any evidence to the contrary and typically remains delusional for years [3,4]. Prognosis is considered poor for these individuals although there has been a few reported cases of successful treatment [5,6]. Some clinical anecdotes suggest that a newer object may replace the old. Typically, the object is of a higher socioeconomic class or is an unattainable figure, such as a movie star or political figure.

The estimated prevalence of delusional disorders is 0.03%, but the assessment of the erotomantic subtype is extremely difficult to ascertain, as the delusion is frequently kept "secret." Others suffering from the disorder, however, will make frequent attempts to contact the person and thus become known in a forensic context. The assessment of persons suffering from erotomania and the prediction of their likelihood to act on their delusions has not been previously examined.

The purpose of this investigation was to analyze existing data from the case files of the Threat Management Unit (TMU) of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to compare erotomanics to nonerotomanics in this group, assessing differences and similarities between the groups. The TMU-based suspects, or subjects as they will be referred to in this paper, proved an ideal study population for two reasons: 1) The TMU focusses exclusively on obsessional subjects, and 2) The Los Angeles area has a high proportion of entertainment figures and other high profile individuals, frequently the victims of erotomantic and love obsessional subjects [7-9]. To the best of our knowledge, the TMU is the only investigative unit set up to specifically deal with obsessional subjects in a forensic setting. The TMU unit was organized in 1990 specifically to handle cases wherein

an individual establishes an obsessional, or abnormal long-term pattern of threat or harassment directed toward a specific individual. By obsessional, we mean persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that result inevitably in some act in relation to the victim. This obsessional quality is egosyntonic, in marked distinction to the egodystonic obsessions found in the DSM-III-R obsessional disorders under the general rubric of anxiety disorders.

Based upon the quality of the obsession, we have identified three distinct groups of obsessional subjects in this sample, only one of which is erotomania. The other two groups we have termed love obsessional and simple obsessional.

Love Obsessional

This group is similar to the erotomaniac group in many ways. Like the erotomaniac group, the subject almost always does not know his/her victim except through the media. Similarly, many in this group hold the delusion that they are loved by their victim. If, however, this erotomaniac delusion is but one of several delusions and psychiatric symptoms, and the subject has a primary psychiatric diagnosis, then the subject would fall into this category. Other subjects in this group are obsessed in their love without possessing the belief that the victim loves them. These individuals often hold a wide variety of beliefs along a spectrum from hoping that their victim "might love me if only given a chance," to "must become the Phoenix Goddess of the Purple Order." A campaign is then begun by the subject to make his existence known to the victim.

Simple Obsessional

Unlike the erotomania group and love obsessional group, there exists a prior relationship between the subject and victim. This prior relationship varied in degree from customer, acquaintance, neighbor, professional relationship, dating, and lover. In all of these cases, obsessional activities began after either 1) the relationship had gone "sour," or 2) the perception by the subject of mistreatment. The subject usually then begins a campaign either to rectify the schism, or to seek some type of retribution.

Methods

In this investigation, information was analyzed from the first 74 TMU case files. Only cases that were officially opened by the TMU for investigation were studied and none of the cases involved domestic violence situations.

The majority of the cases studied were referred by those within the entertainment industry, the mental health community; and, to a lesser extent, detectives and other officers from within the Los Angeles Police Department.

Once referred, the case is screened by the officer in charge, and if the pattern of harassment meets criteria for being obsessional in nature, then a follow-up interview is conducted with the victim. If the case meets investigative criteria, then it is formally opened as a TMU case.

Since many of the cases included victims who are considered "high profile" individuals, such as, movie entertainment persons, the cases are routinely referenced by the victim's name, rather than the subject's name. Such victims can frequently have more than one obsessed subject at a time, and tracking the cases by victim facilitated communication within the TMU. If a second subject became known, the detective assigned to the victim's case would automatically acquire the new case due to familiarity of victim's situation.

All cases were thoroughly reviewed by at least one trained psychiatrist and the information was transcribed upon a profile that was jointly developed by the authors: LAPD

Lieutenant J. Lane and Drs. K. Sharma and M. Zona. The developed profile is over-inclusive, its intent being to capture some included categories without any prior knowledge of their usefulness from surveying the current literature, but which may be found to be significant. This is especially evident in the category areas involving medical history and psychiatric history.

The profiles from the first 74 case files were evaluated and a data base was developed based largely upon the profile that was created. The data base represented the information collected and translated into computer form for compilation and statistical ease.

The majority of the information obtained from the files was self-explanatory with the exception of the following. The presence of a major mental illness was assessed by our review of the complete file. Any mention of diagnosis of an Axis I psychiatric disease or prior stay at a state or psychiatric hospital was considered a positive, "yes." In addition, there were times when it was clear that the letter writer (or the subject who was tape recorded) was suffering from psychotic thinking (such as, delusionary material, clear mention of hallucinations, and or disorganized thought processes.) These subjects were also marked as positive. Firearm involvement was considered positive if the subject either had a firearm registered to him or had specifically admitted or mentioned possession of a firearm. Telephone and letter contact was considered positive if the subject attempted communication at the victim's home, place of work, or agent/employer. A location visit is defined as any visit to a place of work, for example, studio, award ceremony, etc. Threats made were considered positive if the subject made a specific threat against either the victim, the victim's property, or third party associates such as, agent, secretary, etc.

This resulted in 81 data base categories, or fields, for evaluation. The total pieces of information in the data base were 5994.

Results

All of the subjects were by definition "obsessional" in their pursuit. By obsessional, we mean persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses, or images that result inevitably in some act in relation to the victim. As stated in the beginning of this paper, we found that the subjects could be divided into three main groups based upon the quality of their obsession; 1) erotomania, 2) love obsessional, and 3) simple obsessional.

We have found that conceptualizing the cases in this manner facilitated our understanding of the case. The results are therefore presented in this fashion, the characteristics of each of these three groups compared for similarities and differences. Of the first 74 cases, we identified seven cases where the diagnosis of erotomania could be definitively made. There were 32 cases that fulfilled criteria for the love obsessional group. The majority of the cases, 35, belonged to the simple obsessional category. Chi square analysis was performed on each of the various characteristics studied.

See Table 2. First we will compare the victims of each group. Women were the victims in 74%, or 57/74, of our total sample. In the erotomaniac cases, however, the victim was usually a male (5/7), and generally older. Conversely, the victim was very often female (30/32) and notably younger in the love obsession cases. The female victims in the simple obsessional group numbered 25 of the 35 total in this group. These victim sex ratios were found to be significant ($X^2 = 14.97$, $P = .01$).

See Table 3. The subject demographics inversely matched the victims: the subject of erotomaniac cases were usually female (6/7), while the love obsessional subjects were typically male (28/32). The number of male subjects in the simple obsessional group was 25/35. The sex of one subject was never definitively determined for one member of this group, hence the percentages do not add up to 100%. Like the victim sex ratios, these differences among subjects in each group were also found to be significant ($X^2 = 6.81$, $P = .05$).

TABLE 2—Victim: socioeconomic history.

	Erotomania	Love obsess	Simple obsess
Sex:			
Male	71%, 5/7	7%, 2/32	29%, 10/35
Female	29%, 2/7	93%, 30/32	71%, 25/35
Average age	41.7	34.1	41.4

TABLE 3—Subject: socioeconomic history and sexual/marital status.

	Erotomania	Love obsess	Simple obsess
Sex			
Male	14%, 1/7	88%, 28/32	57%, 20/35
Female	86%, 6/7	12%, 4/32	40%, 14/35
Average age	34.6	35.3	34.7
Foreign born	43%, 3/7	3%, 1/32	5%, 2/35
Sexual orientation:			
Hetero	57%, 4/7	50%, 16/32	51%, 18/35
Homo	14%, 1/7	3%, 1/32	9%, 3/35
Bisex	29%, 2/7	3%, 1/32	0%
Unknown	0%	44%, 14/32	40%, 14/35
Marital status			
Single	72%, 5/7	41%, 13/32	29%, 10/35
Div/Sep	14%, 1/7	3%, 1/32	5%, 2/35
Married	14%, 1/7	6%, 2/32	0%
Unknown	0%	50%, 16/32	66%, 23/35

There was little age difference among the subjects of each group, their averages ranging between 34.6 and 35.3 years old.

Of notable interest, (3/7) 43% of the erotomanics were foreign born. This difference was significant ($X^2 = 12.68$, $P = .01$).

The sexual orientation and marital status of the subject groups were broken down. In many cases, their status was unknown. Three of the seven in the group, 43%, of the erotomania subjects were either homosexual or bisexual, and 86%, 6/7, were either single or divorced. These differences were not found to be statistically significant using chi-square analysis.

See Table 4. Some psychiatric features were assessed for these groups. Using the DSM-III-R manual [1], all erotomanics, by definition, have a major mental illness, such as, delusional disorder. Similarly, 12/32, or 37% of all subjects in the love obsessional group, and 40%, 14/35, of the simple obsessional group had either specific mention or clear evidence of a major mental illness. Only 4/32, or 13%, of the subjects in the love obsessional group clearly did not have any major psychiatric disturbance, while 16/32 were listed as unknown due to lack of clear evidence either way. These differences between the groups were significant ($X^2 = 21.70$, $P = 0.01$).

Three of seven, 43%, of the erotomanics had a documented drug/alcohol abuse problem. Statistical analysis was not done due to the high percentage of unknowns in the love obsessional and simple obsessional groups.

Only one individual had a positive family history of obsessional harassment. This subject belonged to the Love Obsessional group. There was also one other individual in this group who made specific mention of identifying with other publicly known stalkers.

In one erotomanic case, there was pursuit of another victim prior to the present victim. The same was true for 15%, 5/32, of the subjects in the love obsession group. None of

TABLE 4—Subject: psychiatric and temporal features.

	Erotomania	Love obsess	Simple obsess
Major mental illness:			
Yes	100%, 7/7	37%, 12/32	40%, 14/35
No		13%, 4/32	43%, 15/35
Unknown		50%, 16/32	17%, 6/35
Known drug/alcohol abuse	43%, 3/7	9%, 3/32	2%, 1/35
Known family history of pursuit	None	3%, 1/32	None
Identification w/other stalkers	None	3%, 1/32	None
Known pursuit of others	14%, 1/7	15%, 5/32	None
Duration of obsession:	125 months	146 months	... ^a
Duration of contact:	19 months	9.7 months	5.1 months

^aInformation not collected.

the subjects in the simple obsessional group had any positive documented history of obsessional activities against a prior victim.

Some temporal features of both the obsession and the contact are shown. The duration of obsession for both the erotomanics and the love obsessionals was extremely long: 125 and 146 months duration respectively. A difference was noted in the duration of contact, however. The erotomanics maintained contact more than twice as long as the love obsessionals. The simple obsessionals usually made contact for less than one year, the average contact duration being 5.1 months.

See Table 5. There were definite differences in the types of contact made. A total of 85%, 6/7, of the erotomanic group subjects were able to reach their victims by telephone. Only 40%, 13/32, of the love obsessional group were able to make telephone contact. A total of 65%, 23/35, of the simple obsessional group made telephonic contact. These differences were significant ($X^2 = 6.93$, $P = 0.05$).

In all cases, the erotomanic subjects wrote to their victims. A total of 81%, 26/32, of the love obsessional subjects also wrote letters while only 34%, 12/35, of the simple obsessional group became involved in letter writing. The differences were significant ($X^2 = 11.9$, $P = 0.01$).

Facsimile transmission to contact victims was also used in three of the 74 cases; one subject was from the erotomanic group and the other two were from the love obsessional group. These differences were significant ($X^2 = 11.9$, $P = 0.01$). These results were not shown in tabular form.

There were not significant differences in either location visits or home visits among the groups. Location, or site visits were made by 43%, 3/7, of the erotomanic group. An

TABLE 5—Subject: contact behavior.

	Erotomania	Love obsess	Simple obsess
Contact:			
Letters	100%, 7/7	81%, 26/32	34%, 12/35
Phone	85%, 6/7	40%, 13/32	65%, 23/35
Location	43%, 3/7	31%, 10/32	31%, 11/35
Stalking	43%, 4/7	21%, 7/32	28%, 10/35
Home	71%, 5/7	21%, 7/32	34%, 12/35
Person/per	15%, 1/7	12%, 4/32	22%, 8/35
Firearm invol	None	16%, 5/32	9%, 3/35
Threats made:	57%, 4/7	18%, 6/32	65%, 23/35
Destruction of property	None	3%, 1/32	14%, 5/35
Physical harm	None	None	6%, 2/35

equal percentage, 31%, from the love and simple obsessional groups made location visits. A total of 71%, or 5/7, of the erotomanic subjects made visits to their victim's home. Only 21%, 7/32, of the love obsessionals and 34%, 12/35, of the simple obsessionals made home visits.

The subjects from the erotomanic group were also almost twice as likely to engage in stalking—43%, 3/7, compared to 21%, 7/32, and 28%, 10/35, for the love obsessional and simple obsessional groups.

Another type of contact behavior studied was termed person-to-person contact. Here, only one, 15%, of the erotomanic subjects made this face-to-face contact. A similar percentage, 12%, 4/32, of the love obsessional group made person-to-person contact. The simple obsessional group made person-to-person contact in 22%, 8/35, of the cases.

There was no mention of firearms, nor were any registered to the erotomanic subjects. In 16%, 5/32, and 9%, 3/35, of the love and simple obsessional cases respectively there was specific mention of a firearm or a firearm was registered to the subject.

Subjects from the simple obsessional group made threats most frequently, 65%, 23/35, followed closely by the erotomanic group, 57%, 4/7. Only 18%, 6/32, of the love obsession group made threats. These differences were significant ($X^2 = 20.9$, $P = 0.01$).

None of the subjects from the erotomanic group followed through on threats made as measured by physical (bodily) harm or destruction of the victim's property. Only one love obsessional subject acted to destroy her victim's property and, like the erotomanic group, none engaged in physically harmful acts. Of the 74 total subjects studied, only two acted to bodily harm their victim and both of these individuals belonged to the simple obsessional group. In addition, 14%, 5/35, of the simple obsessional individuals destroyed the victim's property.

Discussion

Very little has been written of obsessive harassment subjects. Aside from the recently accepted subtype of delusional disorder, erotomania, a careful review of the DSM-III-R yielded no identifiably similar disorder. Even the obsessive disorders are defined only as egodystonic and as such would not accurately describe the love obsessional group. The simple obsessional group is likewise not described as any single psychiatric disorder, and would probably be described as a type of sustainable rage in response to narcissistic injury. To our knowledge, this is the first time that such a large sample of obsessional harassment subjects and their behaviors has been collected and systematically analyzed. Perhaps our most striking findings were best understood by grouping these individuals into three independent groups; erotomania, love obsessional, and simple obsessional.

The DSM-III-R diagnostic criteria for erotomania were closely followed in making the diagnosis on all seven subjects. Our findings were consistent with other estimates [10] that have found that men are usually the victim of erotomanic subjects. Cases of homosexual erotomania have been reported but thought to be rare [11]. Three of our seven erotomanic subjects were cases of homosexual erotomania, one male and two female subjects. Both of the female subjects had unsuccessful marriages prior to the onset of their homosexual erotomania.

The erotomanic subjects generally led lonely existences, and had few if any social supports. This finding supports other observations on these individuals [12]. Six of the erotomanic subjects were single, either separated or divorced. Only one was married. Three of the erotomanics were foreign born: American Samoa, the former USSR, and the former German Democratic Republic, and had no or limited family support.

The contact behavior of the erotomanics differed from the love obsessional and simple obsessional groups in many ways. In all cases, those subjects with erotomania wrote letters to their victims. A total of 85% of the erotomanics were able to reach their victims

by telephone, and 71% had actually managed to find their victim's home—a testimonial to their resourcefulness. Additionally, they were almost twice as likely to stalk their victims when compared to the other two groups. The only type of contact that they did not pursue more frequently than the other two was person-to-person contact, despite what appeared to be multiple chances for access. It may be that such contact on a personal level would “de-mystify” their ideal, shedding their concept of a “perfect union” to the banal and ordinary.

Of note is that despite the high frequency of threats (57%) as well as the high frequency of contact behavior as seen above, none of the erotomaniac subjects made any known attempts to destroy property or do harm to the victim.

A new category of obsession—‘love obsessional’ has been described. Individuals who held the erotomaniac delusion as but one feature of their more prominent psychiatric diagnosis, such as bipolar affective disorder, schizoaffective disorder, or schizophrenia, would fall into this category. The possession of this clinical feature secondary to one of these disorders has been described [13–15]. Some have called such subjects “borderline erotomania” to describe the level of personality organization that many of these individuals possess [16]. We would prefer not to use the word ‘borderline’ in describing this group to avoid the confusion with this term. Furthermore, our love obsessional group includes not only those subjects with erotomaniac features, but also many who do not harbor such a delusion. They simply love their object. They are fanatics in the extreme and are unable or unwilling to abort their activities. Like the erotomaniac group, subjects in the love obsessional group usually have no prior personal knowledge of their love object (victim), and their victims are almost always known originally only through the media.

The prototypical love obsessional victim was one possessing the entertainment/movie industry image of a sexy actress, or “bombshell.” We found these victims were also significantly younger than victims in the other two groups.

Like the other two groups, there was also a high percentage of unmarried subjects in the love obsessional group. The typical subject of this group was an older, single or divorced heterosexual male. Although 37% of our subjects in this category had a major mental illness, we expect a greater proportion to be identified as mentally disordered with our enhanced profiling capability.

The duration of love obsession was longer than that of the erotomanics. This represented an average documented obsession duration of 12 years. It is also interesting to note that despite these individuals possessing these obsessions, their duration of contact is relatively brief—9.7 months. Some of the subjects escalated from obsessional thoughts to obsessional behavior upon cessation of psychotropic medications. For the majority, however, we simply do not yet know what stimulates these subjects to begin contact. We will be looking into other possible mechanisms in our next sample.

The contact behaviors for this group also differed significantly from the other two. These individuals primarily harassed their victims with letter and telephone contact. About one in five engaged in stalking and home visits and like the erotomaniac group, few made person-to-person contact. This group made threats most infrequently—only 18%. Only one individual destroyed property of the victim and none engaged in any physical harm.

The simple obsessional group is qualitatively different from the others in that these subjects have had prior—sometimes intimate—knowledge of their victims. Their obsessional behavior is almost always precipitated by a single event. Their response could probably be best described as a sustainable rage in response to a perceived narcissistic injury.

The majority of these individuals began their activities immediately following a “love gone sour” relationship. The victims usually were female with an average age of 41 years.

The subjects in this group were usually male, but a full 40% were female. There was one case, an anonymous letter writer, whose sex was never determined. The majority of the subjects in this group were heterosexual and none of the 35 subjects in the simple obsessional group were married at the time of the study.

We found an almost equal likelihood of there being a major mental illness within this group, 40% 'yes' vs. 43% "no." The overall subjective impression was that this group had a preponderance of personality disorder—type traits, for example, fear and rage upon abandonment, chronic suicidality, etc., however no systematic data were obtained in this study. Only one individual in this group had a known history of drug or alcohol abuse. This rather dubious result is probably secondary to the underreporting such subjects are known to provide police agencies. Finally, the majority of these simple obsessional group individuals seem to be "first time" offenders. None had a prior history of pursuit of others, identification with other stalkers, or known family history of pursuit.

In almost all cases, the obsession duration was of the same length of time as the contact duration, as these individuals usually acted relatively quickly in response to a specific event. These data, however, was not significantly collected in our original data base.

Like the other two groups, this group also had significantly different patterns of contact. This group did not favor letter writing as a means of ventilating their rage. It seems that this mode of expression does not have the impact that these subjects sought. This group differed most from the other two in their high proportion of person-to-person confrontations. Some of this can be ascribed to the familiarity of the victim to the subject. Additionally, there are few ways to accomplish physical harm to their victim without coming into such close proximity. Indeed, the only two subjects who engaged in known successful acts to harm their victims belonged to this group. Additionally, five others in this group destroyed their victims' property. This group also made threats most frequently, and 30% of those in this group making threats followed through with destruction of property or bodily harm.

Analysis of these groups has yielded statistical independence in almost all characteristics studied and does support our belief that three distinct categories of obsessional harassment subjects exist. We intend to continue to study this fascinating sample of obsessional subjects with the intention to not only further define this population, but also to better understand these individuals to enhance our ability to make appropriate interventions and treatment.

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Address requests for reprints or additional information to
Michael A. Zona, M.D.
P.O. Box 86125
Los Angeles, CA 90086-0125